**Dorothy U. Seyler.** *The Obelisk and the Englishman. The Pioneering Discoveries of Egyptologist William Bankes*. 304 pp., illus., bibl., index. New York: Prometheus Books, 2015. $26 (cloth).

On the lawn in front of Kingston Lacy, a very grand house in the county of Dorset in southern England, stands an Egyptian obelisk, transported from Philae in the Nile. Many obelisks were relocated from Egypt, but this is the only one acquired by a private individual. It was removed by William Bankes, the wealthy heir to a vast landed estate, and a significant, but largely unknown, figure in the early history of Egyptology. This is the first biography of a man who was, among other things, a traveller, collector, aesthete, artist, architect, and archaeologist. The author sets out to revive the memory of this remarkable man. She provides a general account of his entire life, not just of his role as an Egyptologist, and she makes good use of the voluminous archive as well as relevant secondary literature.

The structure of the book is a chronological narrative. Bankes, born in 1786, was the son of an influential politician, whose friends included William Pitt, William Wilberforce and Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington. At Cambridge Bankes was part of a group of friends that included the poet Byron. After a brief period in which he followed the family tradition by entering Parliament, he decided to go abroad, and from 1813 to 1820 he travelled in Portugal, Spain, Egypt and Palestine. On his return, he again entered Parliament, but devoted much effort to improving his houses, including Kingston Lacy, with the help of the distinguished architect, Charles Barry. In 1841, however, he was forced to leave England because of his homosexuality; he had already been acquitted at one trial, but the threat of another was too much. He travelled in Europe, buying and commissioning art works and sending instructions for the decoration of Kingston Lacy, until he died in 1855.

As the author discusses, Bankes’s claim to a place in the history of science lies in his travels in Egypt and Palestine and in the copious record he made of the sites there in notes, drawings and plans. He arrived in Egypt in 1815, at about the same time as the much better known collectors Giovanni Belzoni and Henry Salt, both of whom would at various time be part of Bankes’s team; unlike them, however, he was not collecting with an eye to a profitable sale, but developed a genuine scholarly interest in the art, architecture and archaeology of Egypt. In 1815 he journeyed further south into Nubia than most European travellers and in a second, longer expedition in 1818-19 he again reached the southern limits of ancient Egypt. Between these two journeys he travelled in Palestine; he was one of the first to see Petra, but also did important work recording Roman remains, especially at Jerash.

His party included assistants and other artists, and they were occasionally joined by other travellers, who often presented problems in the journey, and occasionally by their activities afterwards. Seyler argues that the fact that Bankes is not better known is undoubtedly due to his failure to produce a major publication in his own name. Much of his work is unpublished, but parts of it were the basis for publications by other authors, with varying degrees of approval from Bankes. His long-term assistant, Giovanni Finati, published an account of the travels, but much of this work must have been edited or written by Bankes. Other fellow travellers published an account of the journeys in Palestine, reliant on his work and perhaps with his approval, but another unauthorised book resulted in litigation. The concept of what would now be called intellectual property was weakly developed, and the varied claims of the wealthy individual who had funded the expedition, his assistants and fellow travellers could lead to bitter disputes.

Seyler discusses the reasons for Bankes’s failure to publish: his parliamentary and architectural activities and his eventual exile, as well perhaps as a lack of a suitable assistant and his inability to finalise his thoughts on the history of Egyptian art and architecture. This makes it difficult to evaluate his true place in the development of knowledge. In Palestine his work on the Roman towns, and the identification of Jerash as the ancient Gerasa, were certainly important. In Egypt his detailed record of many sites, some of which were subsequently degraded or even totally lost, has been used by later workers. He certainly deserves a place in the much-disputed history of the decipherment of hieroglyphics, alongside Jean-Fran‏*ç*ois Champollion and Thomas Young. He discovered and recorded the Abydos King List, a text that played an important role in the process of decipherment; using the bilingual inscriptions on his Philae obelisk, he was also able to identify correctly the hieroglyphic cartouche for Cleopatra.

Detailed assessment of his legacy to Egyptology is beyond the scope of such a general biography, but this is an informative and accessible introduction to the life and work of an extraordinary individual who deserves wider recognition.

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